The Alliance of Antagonists: The Convergence of *Sarx* and *Nomos* in Pauline Pneumatology and Ethics

1. Introduction: The Galatian Paradox and the Problem of Conflation

The Epistle to the Galatians constitutes one of the most intellectually vigorous and emotionally charged polemics in the New Testament corpus. Within its brief six chapters, the Apostle Paul constructs a theological defense of the gospel that fundamentally reorders the cosmology of his readers. He confronts a crisis precipitated by a group of agitators—often termed "Judaizers"—who were compelling Gentile converts to undergo circumcision and adhere to the Mosaic Law as a necessary completion of their justification. In the course of this defense, Paul introduces a dichotomy that has perplexed interpreters for centuries and serves as the focal point of this investigation: the apparent conflation of the "Law" (*nomos*) with the "Flesh" (*sarx*).

The user query identifies a critical exegetical crux located in Galatians 5: "Paul seems to conflate the 'flesh' with the 'law' by transitioning between the two concepts without making distinctions between them." This observation strikes at the heart of Pauline theology. In traditional Jewish thought, and indeed in much of Paul's own writing (e.g., Romans 7:12), the Law is regarded as holy, righteous, and good—a divine gift to Israel that distinguishes the covenant people from the "sinners of the Gentiles" (Gal 2:15). Conversely, the "flesh" is consistently portrayed as the seat of human frailty, sin, and opposition to God. Yet, in the transition from the theological arguments of chapters 3 and 4 to the parenetic (ethical) exhortations of chapter 5, Paul treats these two concepts—the divine *Torah* and the sinful *sarx*—as functionally equivalent in their opposition to the Spirit (*pneuma*).

This report posits that this conflation is not merely a rhetorical slip, a moment of passionate imprecision, or a "perceived" confusion on the part of the reader. Rather, it is a **real, deliberate, and sophisticated theological argument**. Paul constructs a functional equivalence between *nomos* and *sarx* based on the sphere of agency and power. His argument asserts that because the Law relies on human capability for its fulfillment, and because human capability is thoroughly compromised by the *sarx*, to turn to the Law for justification is inevitably to turn to the Flesh.

To understand this, one must recognize that Paul is operating within an apocalyptic framework where the universe is divided into two warring dominions: the present evil age (dominated by Flesh/Sin) and the new creation (dominated by Spirit/Grace). The shock of Galatians is Paul's relegation of the Torah to the side of the "present evil age." By analyzing

the lexical domains of the key terms, the historical pressure of the Galatian crisis, the allegorical setup in Galatians 4, and the specific "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5, this report will demonstrate that for Paul, legalism is not merely a theological error but an anthropological regression—a return to a "fleshly" mode of existence that generates strife rather than holiness.

This analysis will proceed by first defining the antagonists (*Sarx* and *Nomos*) in their Pauline context, exploring the allegorical and cosmological foundations laid in chapters 3 and 4, and then conducting a granular exegesis of Galatians 5 to show how the "Works of the Law" and the "Works of the Flesh" are, in the final analysis, identical phenomena arising from the same source: the autonomous human self.

2. The Taxonomy of the Antagonists: Defining the Domains

Before analyzing the conflation, it is necessary to establish the independent identities of the two concepts Paul brings together. The conflation is shocking precisely because the terms ostensibly belong to opposite categories: one to the sphere of divine revelation (*Nomos*), the other to the sphere of human corruption (*Sarx*).

2.1 *Sarx* (Flesh): Beyond the Biological

In modern parlance, "flesh" often connotes the physical body or sensual lusts, leading to a reductive reading of Paul that equates "flesh" with sexual desire or gluttony. However, Paul's usage in Galatians is far more comprehensive and distinctively redemptive-historical. If *sarx* were merely the body, the Law (which acts upon the body but is spiritual in origin) would not necessarily be its ally.

2.1.1 *Sarx* as a Sphere of Existence

Scholarly consensus, particularly following the insights of J. Louis Martyn and James D.G. Dunn, recognizes that *sarx* in Galatians acts as an "apocalyptic antinomy" to the Spirit.[1] It is not merely the material substance of the body (*soma*), but a mode of existence. It represents the "present evil age" (Gal 1:4) and the condition of humanity locked in opposition to God.[2]

- **The Locus of Human Frailty:** *Sarx* represents humanity in its distance from God. It is "that which is merely human," encompassing human limitations, mortality, and weakness.[4]
- **The Locus of Human Strength:** Paradoxically, *sarx* also encompasses human strength and achievement when those are relied upon for standing before God. When Paul speaks of "confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3-4), he refers to his Jewish pedigree, his zeal, and his legal obedience.[5] Thus, "flesh" includes religious piety, heritage, and moral striving.

2.1.2 *Sarx* as an Active Power

Sarx is not a passive substance; it is an active, militant power. It has "desires" (*epithumia*) which actively war against the Spirit (Gal 5:17).[7] It is an "occupying power" that enslaves the human will.[9] The "flesh" is not merely the battlefield; it is one of the armies. It seeks to capture the believer and bring them back into slavery. This active hostility is crucial for understanding the conflation: if the Law can be shown to be a tool that the Flesh uses to capture the believer, then the Law effectively becomes an agent of the Flesh.

2.1.3 The Anachronism of the Flesh

A crucial insight from Russell and other scholars suggests that *sarx* is a redemptive-historical category. *Sarx* represents the "old age" before the invasion of the Spirit. For a Gentile Christian to turn to Jewish law observance is anachronistic; it is a return to a mode of existence (the flesh) that has been superseded by the Spirit.[4] To live "according to the flesh" is to live as if the Messiah had not come, relying on the resources of the old creation (ethnicity, ritual, moral effort) rather than the new creation.

2.2 *Nomos* (Law): The Ambivalent Power

The term *nomos* occurs 32 times in Galatians, indicating its centrality to the dispute.[10] In Judaism, the Torah was the ultimate expression of God’s will. In Galatians, Paul presents a radical revision of the Law's function.

2.2.1 The Law as Guardian, Not Savior

Paul argues in Galatians 3:24 that the Law was a *paidagogos* (guardian/tutor) intended for the period of Israel's minority. Its function was temporary—"until Christ came".[11] It was added "because of transgressions" (Gal 3:19). This definition inherently limits the Law. It is not the solution to the human plight; it is a holding measure.

2.2.2 The Law as a Curse

In Galatians 3:10, Paul makes the startling assertion: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse." He cites Deuteronomy 27:26, arguing that the Law demands perfect obedience, which no one ("no flesh," Rom 3:20) can render. Therefore, the *function* of the Law in the sphere of human experience is to pronounce a curse, not a blessing. It diagnoses the illness but cannot cure it.

2.2.3 The Law "Weakened by the Flesh"

While this phrase appears in Romans 8:3, the concept is operative in Galatians. The Law is "spiritual" (Rom 7:14), but it must operate through the medium of the human being. Since the human being is "flesh," the Law is rendered impotent to justify. The Law commands the Flesh to be holy; the Flesh is incapable of holiness; the result is condemnation.[12]

2.3 Table: The Convergence of Domains

The following table illustrates how Paul aligns these two concepts in Galatians, moving them from separate categories into a unified front against the Spirit.

Attribute	Sarx (Flesh)	Nomos (Law) in Galatians	The Conflation (The Common Thread)
Origin/Nature	Human, Earthly, Old Age.	Divine, but mediated by angels (Gal 3:19).	Both belong to the "Present Evil Age" (Gal 1:4).
Power Source	Human effort, self-reliance.	Demands human doing ("He who does them," Gal 3:12).	Both rely on **Human Agency** rather than Divine Gift.
Function	Opposes the Spirit (Gal 5:17).	Confines under Sin (Gal 3:22).	Both result in **Slavery** (Gal 4:24, 5:1).
Outcome	Corruption (Gal 6:8).	Curse (Gal 3:10).	Both lead to **Death/Exclusion** from inheritance.
Manifestation	"Works of the Flesh" (Gal 5:19).	"Works of the Law" (Gal 2:16).	Both produce **Boasting** and Division (Gal 6:13).

3. The Precursor: The Theological Engine of Conflation (Galatians 3-4)

The user asks how Paul ties the Law to the Flesh together if the conflation is perceived, or what the common thread is if it is real. The answer lies in the detailed theological groundwork Paul lays in chapters 3 and 4. He does not spring the conflation on the reader in chapter 5; he builds it methodically through cosmology and allegory.

3.1 The Argument from Experience: Spirit vs. Flesh (Gal 3:1-5)

Paul begins his theological assault by appealing to the Galatians' conversion experience. "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (Gal 3:2).[13]

- **The Binary:** Paul establishes a mutually exclusive binary. One is either in the sphere of the Spirit (Faith) or the sphere of the Law (Works). There is no overlap.
- **The Regression:** In Galatians 3:3, he explicitly equates the Law with the Flesh: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?".[14]
    - Here, "being perfected" refers to their attempt to add circumcision and Torah observance to their faith.
    - Paul labels this turn to Torah as a turn to *sarx*.
    - **Insight:** This is the first instance of the real conflation. The *common thread* here is the **means of perfection**. If the Spirit initiates salvation, only the Spirit can complete it. To switch to the Law is to switch to human effort, which is the definition of "Flesh."

3.2 The Cosmological Argument: *Stoicheia* and the Law (Gal 4:1-11)

Paul deepens the conflation by introducing the concept of *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* ("the elemental spirits/principles of the world"). This is one of the most radical moves in Pauline theology, where he aligns Jewish Torah observance with Pagan idolatry.

3.2.1 The Equivalence of Slavery

In Galatians 4:3, Paul says that before Christ, "we" (Jews and Gentiles) were enslaved to the *stoicheia*.

- For Gentiles, this manifested as worship of "beings that by nature are not gods" (Gal 4:8).[15]
- For Jews, this manifested as being "under the law" (Gal 4:4-5).

When the Gentile Galatians desire to adopt the Law (observing "days and months and seasons and years," Gal 4:10), Paul accuses them of "turning back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles" (Gal 4:9).[16]

- **The Logic:** How can a Gentile "turn back" to the Law if they were never under it? They were pagans.
- **The Conflation:** Paul argues that Paganism and Judaism (without Christ) are structurally identical. Both are systems of slavery to the "elements of the world."
- **The Connection to Flesh:** The "world" (*kosmos*) and the "flesh" (*sarx*) are allied concepts. They represent the material, transient, created order. By seeking justification through physical marks (circumcision) and astronomical cycles (festivals), the Galatians are trusting in the material world rather than the Spirit. Thus, the Law is revealed to be a "fleshly" system when used for justification.[17]

3.3 The Allegorical Argument: Hagar, Sinai, and the Flesh (Gal 4:21-31)

This section provides the "smoking gun" for the Law-Flesh conflation. It is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the ethical instructions in chapter 5. Paul reinterprets the Genesis narrative of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, to categorize the Law as a phenomenon of the Flesh.

3.3.1 The Two Mothers

Paul sets up an allegory where the two mothers represent two covenants:

1. **Hagar (The Slave Woman):** Represents Mount Sinai (The Law) and the "present Jerusalem" (Judaism of Paul's day).[19]
2. **Sarah (The Free Woman):** Represents the "Jerusalem above" (The Church/New Covenant) and the Promise.

3.3.2 The Principle of Birth: Flesh vs. Spirit

The crucial distinction is how the sons were born.

- **Ishmael (Hagar's Son):** Born "according to the flesh" (*kata sarka*) (Gal 4:23, 29). This refers to the fact that Ishmael was born through natural human procreation. Abraham and Sarah, impatient with God's delay, used their own biological resources (flesh) to produce a son. It was a product of **self-reliance**.[21]
- **Isaac (Sarah's Son):** Born "through promise" and "according to the Spirit" (*kata pneuma*). His birth was biologically impossible (Sarah was barren). It required Divine Agency.

3.3.3 The Conflation Realized

By explicitly linking **Mount Sinai (The Law)** with **Hagar** and **Ishmael (The Flesh)**, Paul defines the Law as a "Fleshly" Covenant.

- **Why?** Because the Law, like Ishmael, is about what human beings can produce. It is about human effort, human genealogy, and human adherence to rules.
- **The Implication:** To go back to the Law is to become an Ishmael. It is to choose to be born "according to the flesh."
- **The Persecution:** Paul notes that the one born of flesh "persecuted" the one born of Spirit (Gal 4:29). This identifies the Judaizers (the Law-promoters) as the "Flesh-born" persecutors of the Spirit-born Galatians. This sets the stage for the "biting and devouring" in chapter 5.[23]

4. The Pivot: Transitioning from Legalism to License (Galatians 5:1-12)

Having established the theological identity of the Law as a "fleshly" power in chapter 4, Paul moves to the practical crisis in chapter 5. This section bridges the gap between the theological argument (Justification) and the ethical argument (Sanctification), maintaining the

Law/Flesh conflation throughout.

4.1 Circumcision as Mutilation

In Galatians 5:2-4, Paul warns that accepting circumcision means "Christ will be of no advantage to you" and that they are "severed from Christ."
In verse 12, Paul engages in biting satire: "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" (apokopsontai - cut themselves off entirely).25

- **Significance:** By referencing castration (a practice associated with the pagan cult of Cybele, prevalent in Galatia), Paul is again associating the Jewish rite of circumcision with pagan fleshly rituals. He reduces the "holy mark of the covenant" to mere "flesh-cutting."
- **The Fleshly Focus:** The agitators are obsessed with the physical organ (the foreskin). Paul mocks this obsession, essentially saying, "If you think cutting flesh makes you holy, why stop at the foreskin? Cut it all off!" This rhetorical move firmly places the Law's demands in the realm of the grotesque and the carnal.[26]

4.2 Faith Working Through Love

Galatians 5:6 provides the counter-thesis: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."

- Here, Paul dismisses the category of "Flesh" entirely. Whether one has the mark (Jew) or lacks it (Gentile) is irrelevant.
- This prepares the reader for the ethical argument: The goal is not "Works of Law" (circumcision) but "Faith working through Love." This redefinition of the goal allows Paul to transition to the ethical section, where "Love" is the fulfillment of the Law, and "Flesh" is the enemy of Love.

5. The Conflation Realized: The Ethical Crisis (Galatians 5:13-18)

We now arrive at the specific text mentioned in the user query. "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

5.1 The Transition: A Change of Subject?

Critics might argue that Paul changes subjects here—from "Legalism" (v. 1-12) to "Libertinism" (v. 13-26). They argue that "Flesh" in v. 13 means "sensual indulgence," whereas "Flesh" in ch. 3 meant "human effort."
However, the conflation argument posits that there is no change of subject.

- **The Context of Conflict:** The immediate context of verse 15 ("bite and devour") suggests that the "fleshly" behavior Paul fears is not an orgy, but **infighting**.

- **The Cause of Infighting:** The infighting was caused by the introduction of the Law. The debates over circumcision, calendar observance, and table fellowship created the "biting and devouring."
- **The Synthesis:** Therefore, Paul warns them not to use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh *by returning to the Law*. If they return to the Law, they will become "fleshly" (haughty, judgmental, divisive), which will destroy the community.

5.2 "Biting and Devouring": The Sociological Proof

Galatians 5:15 ("But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another") is the sociological proof of the theological conflation.[25]

- **Mechanism:** The Law creates distinctions. It creates a "Zeal" (*zelos*) for status.
- **Result:** This zeal manifests as "strife" (*eris*) and "factions" (*hairesis*).
- **Conclusion:** The community that seeks perfection through the Law descends into animalistic brutality. This brutality is the signature of the *sarx*. Thus, the Law acts as a catalyst for the Flesh.

5.3 The War of Desires (Gal 5:16-18)

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."
This passage explicitly sets up the triangle: Spirit, Flesh, Law.

- **Verse 16:** Spirit opposes Flesh.
- **Verse 18:** Spirit implies freedom from Law.
- **Transitive Property:** If being led by the Spirit means *not* being under the Law, and being led by the Spirit means overcoming the Flesh, then being *under the Law* aligns one with the *Flesh*.[28]

The "desire" of the flesh here is not just for sin, but for **autonomy** and **self-justification**. The Judaizers "desire" to make a good showing in the flesh (Gal 6:12). The flesh "desires" to be under the law because the law gives the flesh a ladder to climb and a reason to boast.

6. The Evidence: The Works of the Flesh vs. The Fruit of the Spirit

The lists in Galatians 5:19-23 are often read as general moral instruction. However, a close inspection reveals they are tailored to the Galatian crisis, further cementing the Law-Flesh conflation.

6.1 The Plurality of Works vs. The Singularity of Fruit

Paul contrasts "Works" (*erga*) of the flesh with the "Fruit" (*karpos*) of the Spirit.

- **Works (*Erga*):** Recall Gal 2:16 "Works of the Law" (*erga nomou*). By using the term

"Works" for the flesh, Paul linguistically links the "Works of the Flesh" to the "Works of the Law." Both are plural, fragmented, and manufactured by human effort.[30]

- **Fruit (*Karpos*):** Fruit is singular and organic. It cannot be manufactured; it must grow from a life source (the Spirit). This highlights that the alternative to the Law is not "better works" but a "new life."

6.2 Analyzing the Vice List (Gal 5:19-21)

The list of the works of the flesh contains 15 items. While it begins with sexual sins (immorality, impurity, sensuality) and religious sins (idolatry, sorcery), the **bulk of the list** (8 items) focuses on social discord—the very problems caused by the Judaizers.[31]

Table 2: The Legalistic Manifestation of the "Works of the Flesh"

Greek Term	Translation	Connection to Legalistic Crisis
Echthrai	Enmity	The hostility between Jew and Gentile that the Law creates (Eph 2:14).
Eris	Strife	Debates over Torah observance and genealogy.
Zelos	Jealousy/Zeal	The "Zeal" for the Law that Paul once had (Phil 3:6) and Judaizers promote.
Thymoi	Fits of Anger	The heated arguments in the Galatian churches.
Eritheiai	Rivalries	Selfish ambition; teachers vying for followers (Gal 4:17).
Dichostasiai	Dissensions	Standing apart; separation at table fellowship (Gal 2:12).
Haireseis	Divisions/Factions	The formation of a "Circumcision Party."

Phthonoi	Envy	Envying the status of the "Super-Apostles" or the Jewish heritage.

Key Insight: These vices are not random. They are the specific sociological fallout of introducing the Torah into a Gentile community. Paul classifies these "religious" disputes as "works of the flesh." This is the ultimate condemnation of the Judaizers: their movement, though claiming high ground, produces the same rotten fruit as paganism.[34]

6.3 The Irony of the Law: "Against Such Things There Is No Law"

Paul concludes the list of the Fruit of the Spirit (Love, joy, peace...) with the phrase: "Against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:23).[36]

- The Legalists are obsessed with the Law, but their actions (Strife, Envy) are condemned by the Law.
- The Spirit-led believers ignore the ritual Law, yet their lives (Love, Peace) fulfill the Law's deepest intent.
- **The Logic:** You cannot legislate fruit. The Law can forbid the works of the flesh, but it cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, to get the morality the Law demands, one must abandon the Law as a system and embrace the Spirit.

7. Scholarly Synthesis: Defining the Common Thread

The user asks: "If real, what is the common thread of his argument?" We can now synthesize the findings through the lens of major scholarly perspectives.

7.1 The Common Thread: Human Agency (The "Traditional" View - Westerholm/Schreiner)

Scholars like Stephen Westerholm and Thomas Schreiner emphasize that the common thread is **Human Ability** or **Self-Reliance**.

- The **Flesh** is human nature in its fallen, limited state.
- The **Law** is a command to "Do."
- The **Conflation:** When a fallen human ("Flesh") tries to "Do" ("Law") to earn salvation, the result is "Works of the Flesh." The Law is not evil, but relying on it invokes the Flesh. Therefore, the common thread is the **failure of the self** to bridge the gap to God.[37]

7.2 The Common Thread: The Old Age (The Apocalyptic View - Martyn)

J. Louis Martyn argues the common thread is **Cosmological**.

- Flesh and Law are both powers of the **Present Evil Age**.
- The Spirit is the power of the **New Creation**.
- **Conflation:** The Law was a "guardian" for the time of infancy (Gal 4). Now that Christ has come, the time of the Law is over. To cling to it is to cling to the corpse of the Old Age. The Flesh and the Law are allied because they both belong to the world that is passing away. They are "antinomial" to the Spirit.[1]

7.3 The Common Thread: Exclusion (The Social View - Dunn)

James D.G. Dunn suggests the common thread is **Boundary Markers**.

- The "Flesh" refers to ethnic identity (Jewishness).
- The "Works of the Law" are the markers of that identity (Circumcision).
- **Conflation:** The Judaizers are boasting in their "Flesh" (Ethnicity) and using the "Law" to enforce it. The Law becomes a tool of Fleshly pride. The common thread is **selfishness**—using religion to exclude others and elevate oneself.[41]

7.4 Unified Synthesis

The most robust answer combines these views. The conflation is Real and the common thread is Autonomy.
Whether it is the autonomy of the Moral Agent trying to earn salvation (Westerholm), the autonomy of the Old World resisting the New (Martyn), or the autonomy of the Ethnic Group excluding others (Dunn), the root is the same: The Self (Flesh) utilizing the Law to secure its own existence apart from the radical grace of the Spirit.

8. Conclusion: The Reality of the Conflation

The investigation into Galatians 5 confirms that Paul's transition between "Law" and "Flesh" is not a careless conflation but a deliberate theological identification.

Is it Real or Perceived?
It is Real. Paul intends to shock the Galatians by showing them that the "Holy Law" they covet is, in the hands of the Judaizers, functionally identical to the "Sinful Flesh" they reject.
How does he tie them together?

1. **Allegorically (Gal 4):** By linking the Sinai Covenant to Hagar and Ishmael, identifying the Law as a "fleshly" birth.
2. **Cosmologically (Gal 4):** By equating Law observance with "weak and worthless elements" (*stoicheia*), linking it to the material world.
3. **Sociologically (Gal 5):** By showing that Law observance leads to "biting and devouring" and "works of the flesh" (strife, envy).

What is the Common Thread?
The common thread is Human Self-Reliance.

- **Flesh** is the self attempting to live apart from God.

- **Law** (in this context) is the self attempting to be righteous apart from the Spirit.
- Therefore, **Law = Flesh**.

Paul's argument is that there is no middle ground. One cannot use the Law to tame the Flesh, because the Law *is* the sphere of the Flesh. The only escape is the Cross (Gal 6:14), which crucifies the Flesh, and the Spirit, which produces the Life that the Law promised but could never deliver. The "Conflation" is Paul's way of saying that religion without the Spirit is just another form of sin.

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